



Restoring "Enthusiasm": Excerpts from an Interview with Peter Kubelka

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RESTORING ENTHUSIASM

Excerpts from an interview with Peter Kubelka

LUCY FISCHER: I wanted to ask you some questions about your re-editing of *Enthusiasm*. Can you tell me when you first saw the film?

Peter Kubelka: First I want to say that you used the word "re-editing"; but it's not really a re-editing; it's just a restoration. I only corrected the relation between sound track and image so as to bring it back to the original state. I have already noticed that some people speak of a Peter Kubelka "version," but I don't want that. I only tried to come as close to the original as possible. I first saw *Enthusiasm* at the Yugoslavian Film Archive. Mr. Achimowitz, who is one of the curators there, and likes Vertov very much, told me that I should see it. He said that I should only see the first reel of the film because the rest was not so good. That, interestingly enough, corresponds to the fact that the rest of the film was more out of synch than the first reel. This was in 1965 or 1966: and, of course, I was very impressed by the film.

LF: Were you immediately aware of the fact that the film needed restoration and interested in undertaking such a project? Or was there a time lapse?

PK: There was a big time lapse. I only saw the first reel at this time: I saw the rest of *Enthusiasm* in 1967 when the Austrian Film Museum had its first Vertov retrospective.

I realized then that the rest of the film was out of synch. Also, there were whole passages where I always fell asleep, which is a strange thing to do in a Vertov film. When I restored the film I found out that these sequences had real articulations which come out only by the sync events.

LF: To which sections are you referring?

PK: There is a sequence when the Plan comes into the film and you have this display model going around and around. Then also, the industrial sequence where there are many lorries going. But this is now one of the most exciting sequences because here Vertov worked in an absolute sync event articulation. He especially worked in this sequence with the specific sound of certain machines and the sound appears exactly when the machine appears. When the camera changes the visual field, the sound changes also.

This sequence is now completely in synch. It was, however, most difficult to find because previously it was completely out of synch. In the original version you saw this huge sledge hammer (moved by three people) come down in close-up. Knowing the grammar of Vertov it was impossible that there was no sound with that image. It could have been a purposeful silence; but the sledge hammer could not have just come down without any relation to the sound track. This sequence was very difficult to work on because here the sound was out of synch by more than 300 frames and visually there were more hits of the hammer than I had sound.

LF: Did Vertov synchronize silence with one of the sledge hammer hits?

PK: Not silence, words. And this is one of the finest grammatical achievements of Vertov in film. He starts by introducing a strong rhythmic accent; when the ham-

The sledgehammer sequence (see text above)



mer comes down . . . BOOM! You hear a strong sound, so that you get used to this accent. After some time the hammer comes down and when the hammer hits the object you don't hear natural sound anymore, you hear a word, a passionate call.

This brings us to how I did the restoration. I did it without any written or other references. I did it only on the basis that I was a film-maker who understood Vertov's way of composing.

LF: On a technical level, how did you proceed?

PK: What we began with was a normal positive, composite print with sound from Gosfilmofond's negative in Moscow. We separated it, which means we made an image negative and a sound negative. We also made a sound track on magnetic perforated tape. But then I did not work with the tape. The optical sound permits you also to see the sound writing and you can see if the original flow of sound signals is maintained or if there has been a cut. You see every cut. Then when I analyzed the sound track I found out how the cuts that Vertov himself had made looked. And then I found out how later restoration cuts looked, or how cuts that projectionists who had ruined the print looked. Which means that the print on which I worked was not made from the original negative; but, apparently, was made from a negative which had been made from a print.

Of course, Gosfilmofond had searched for the best print available but the print had gone through several stages of destruction and restoration—at least one stage of very bad restoration, namely a cosmetic restoration where the people who had restored it had cut away edges of the sound or of the image in order to make it fit.

And there was a restoration phase where black leader had already been put in to make up for missing elements in the image. Anyway, in spite of the black leader, all the places where there were lip sync were out of sync in the old versions. So this was the state in which I found the film. When I started to work with the separated image and sound I only realized how the film was gaining in brilliance and precision and it really changed completely. In the first reel, for example, it was out of sync only by a few frames and you still got, more or less, what was meant. But the *start* of the sync was always ruined. But when it's really in sync, it comes "Bang!" and immediately works and that's very different. You remember in the first reel, there are images of bells and then crosses which are faded out, one-two-three. In the restored version you have rhythmic accents on everything and in the other version you did not.

LF: How did you correct for the lack of precise synchronization?

PK: The working process was that I had the image work print and then the optical sound, and I tried to find the right place and went forward and backward and adjusted it until I found the right place. Again, to defend myself, I do not want people to view this as *my* version. What I did was really just to find out how it originally was and I did not cut one single frame, either from the sound or from the image. When the image was too long, I put silent leader in the sound to make it match again. When the sound was too long I put black leader in the image. So nothing is lost. I must point out very strongly that this is not a restoration like those of the 19th century, when they restored paintings by painting things in to make it look like the original. This is not what I did. I did not make a cosmetic restoration. It can be undone anytime and it will be in the state in which I found it.

LF: How close to the original do you believe that your restored version comes?

PK: There remain some places in the film where I am still not sure if it's in the right sync. And they occur near the Plan sequence. There are some moments which are not up to the level with which I would credit Vertov; and I was not able to find a more convincing relation between sound and image than the one that was there. But I would say that the film is now 90% in synch and there were differences in sync from between two or three frames to more than 300 frames.

You know, Vertov had to change the title of the film from *Enthusiasm* to *Symphony of the Donbas*. But the real title is *Enthusiasm*. This is what he wanted. Now that the film is restored this is what you really feel. You can feel this drive, this enthusiasm. You can feel that and you did not feel that before.

Contributors, continued

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